

UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

‘The Imperial Character’

Alexius I Comnenus and the Byzantine Ideal of Emperorship

This dissertation is submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA Honours in History at the University of Canterbury. This dissertation is the result of my own work. Material from the published or unpublished work of other historians used in the dissertation is credited to the author in the footnote references. The dissertation is approximately 9,005 words in length.

ELISABETH MICHELLE ROLSTON

Supervisor: Dr. Chris Jones

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ABSTRACT

The twelfth century saw what has been acknowledged by historians as a change in the nature of Byzantine emperorship with the reign of Alexius I Comnenus (1081-1118) and his succeeding dynasty. The rule of the Comneni has been associated with an emphasis on military achievement and a greater dynastic focus. While the practical changes to imperial rule under the Comneni have been well documented by historians, a focus on the character of the emperor and his depiction in historical writing has not yet received scholarly attention. The reign of Alexius was documented by two twelfth-century historians, Anna Comnena and John Zonaras. Their works offer two markedly different interpretations of Alexius's character and his suitability to occupy the imperial office. Anna Comnena's *Alexiad* draws on Biblical and Classical traditions to establish Alexius as the model of an ideal emperor. John Zonaras's *Epitome Historiarum* sets different standards for private men and for emperors. While Alexius's character is sufficiently virtuous for a private man, he falls short of the standard imposed for an emperor. This research shows that both writers create an ideal of emperorship in which the character of the emperor plays a vital role. The nature of this ideal, and the influences that inform it, are unique to each writer. Anna and John identify similar character traits in Alexius. Their point of difference, however, is whether they believe Alexius's character is suitable for the imperial office, and the extent to which he fulfils their ideal standard of emperorship.

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NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

The translations used for the *Alexiad*, the *Epitome Historiarum* and the Septuagint are my own unless otherwise indicated in the footnotes. In the case of the *Epitome Historiarum*, this is due to necessity: there exists, to date, no full translation of the work into English. The *Alexiad* has been translated twice: first by Elizabeth Dawes in 1928 and later by E. R. A. Sewter in 1969. The use of a translation, regardless of quality, creates a barrier to understanding the text that is best avoided. Published translations such as Sewter's aim for readability in English, often at the expense of accuracy. In analysing the *Alexiad*, I have translated as literally as possible to retain the sense of the original. Greek names throughout the dissertation have been Latinised according to convention.

Biblical citations in this dissertation are from the Greek Septuagint. This is the version of the Old Testament that was known and utilised in twelfth-century Byzantium. As with the *Alexiad*, the Septuagint has an English translation available. Using the Greek version, however, not only avoids the issues of translation, but allows for direct comparison between Biblical quotations in the *Alexiad* and the text of the Septuagint.

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Introduction

The reign of Alexius I Comnenus was a period marked by turbulence and change in the Byzantine Empire. Alexius came to the throne at the end of the ‘Eleventh-Century Crisis’ in 1081, following the loss of vast amounts of territory in Anatolia to the Seljuk Turks. During his reign, which ended with his death in 1118, Alexius introduced numerous sweeping reforms to the administration of the empire. His reign, and that of his succeeding dynasty, has been identified by historians such as Patricia Karlin-Hayter as marking a change in the nature of Byzantine emperorship.¹ This change was predominantly characterised by a strong dynastic focus: Alexius restructured the imperial system of rewards and honours to favour his family, and Margaret Mullett describes emperorship under the Comneni as ‘a family business’.² Alexius is therefore a significant figure in the history of Byzantine emperorship. While the practical changes to imperial administration under the Comneni have been the subject of considerable scholarship, the characteristics and traits of the ideal emperor have remained unexamined during this period. Depictions of Alexius in the histories written by his contemporaries offer significant insight into the virtues and traits valued in a Byzantine emperor in the twelfth century.

Alexius’s reign was documented by two twelfth-century historians, Anna Comnena and John Zonaras, who offered vastly different interpretations of not only his reign, but the suitability of his character to the imperial office. This dissertation will examine how the character of Alexius is presented by both authors, and the ways each constructs their standard of the ideal emperor. The first chapter will discuss the foundation of a Byzantine imperial ideal through the model of Constantine I, the first Christian emperor, the continuing influence of the Constantinian model throughout Byzantine historical writing, and the rise of critical depictions of emperors’ characters by historians in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The second chapter will analyse the *Alexiad* of Anna Comnena by considering the unique position of its author among Byzantine historians, the influence of Classical and Biblical models in the construction of the ideal imperial character, and the virtues identified by Anna as contributing to Alexius’s exemplary reign. The third chapter will discuss the *Epitome Historiarum* of John Zonaras, including the different ways John evaluates

¹ P. Karlin-Hayter, ‘Alexios Komnenos: Not in the strict sense of the word an emperor’, in M. Mullett and D. Smythe (ed.), *Alexios I Komnenos: Papers*, Belfast, Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations, 1996, pp. 139-140

² M. Mullett, ‘Alexios I Komnenos and Imperial Renewal’, in P. Magdalino (ed.), *New Constantines*, Hampshire, Variorum, 1994, p. 261

Alexius's character as a private person and as an emperor, a comparison with Alexius's portrayal in the *Alexiad*, and John's place within the *Kaiserkritik* tradition of Byzantine historiography.

Historiography

The depiction of Alexius in twelfth-century historical writing engages with numerous aspects of historiography. Considerable scholarship has been dedicated to the reign of Alexius and the Comnenian dynasty, particularly the concept of a change in emperorship. The history of political thought is also significant, particularly Byzantine political thought and the role of the emperor. More broadly, this research engages with the wider field of Byzantine studies.

The reign of Alexius received significant scholarly attention in the late twentieth century, most notably through the publication of a collection of essays focused on Alexius in 1996, *Alexios I Komnenos: Papers*, edited by Margaret Mullett and Dion Smythe. Within this collection, chapters by Patricia Karlin-Hayter, Paul Magdalino, Margaret Mullett, and Michael Angold engage with the nature of emperorship under Alexius. Of these, Mullett's work sets out to 'establish a portrait of Alexius as emperor', though her focus is on his representation in rhetoric and poetry.³ In addition, Alexander Kazhdan and Ann Wharton Epstein state that the Comneni 'typified the new imperial virtues' of the emperor as 'the archetypal warrior', though their analysis is focused on Manuel I, Alexius's grandson, and they do not mention Alexius himself.⁴

The study of emperorship prompts engagement with scholarship surrounding the history of political thought. Studies of Byzantine emperorship can be found in the otherwise Western-oriented field of medieval political thought. In his *A History of Medieval Political Thought: 300-1450*, Joseph Canning discusses Byzantium as the origin of Christianised political thought, though the work is focused on Western Europe.⁵ Similarly, D. M. Nicol's chapter on Byzantine political thought in the *Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c. 350-c. 1450* appears as the singular treatment of Byzantine political thought in a work dedicated to the medieval West. More focused historiography can be found among Byzantinists with an interest in political thought and the nature of emperorship. The most significant recent scholarship in this area is Anthony

³ M. Mullett, 'The Imperial Vocabulary of Alexios I Komnenos', in M. Mullett and D. Smythe (ed.), *Alexios I Komnenos: Papers*, Belfast, Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations, 1996, pp. 360-363

⁴ A. P. Kazhdan and A. W. Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, pp. 110-113

⁵ J. Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought: 300-1450*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. xix

Kaldellis's *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome*. Kaldellis challenges the concept of the 'imperial idea' that the emperor was appointed by God, instead contending that Byzantium, being modelled on Rome, was republican in nature.⁶ In his discussion, Kaldellis highlights a tendency in the field of Byzantine studies to accept, unchallenged, the concept of the 'imperial idea', and cites Paul Alexander as an influential example of this tendency.⁷ Kaldellis's work is concerned with separating the ideology expressed in panegyric from the political reality of Byzantium.

Kaldellis's criticism has relevance to the wider field of Byzantine studies. He emphasises how works such as panegyrics have been misinterpreted as political theory in the field, citing prominent Byzantinists who utilise this approach. Kaldellis gives the example of Averil Cameron, who treats Eusebius's orations in praise of Constantine as 'official political theory'.⁸ His caution against taking sources at face value suggests a significant trend across Byzantine studies, particularly regarding the importance of the emperor, which has only recently been challenged. In the preface to his 1982 work, *People and Power in Byzantium: An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies*, co-authored with Alexander Kazhdan, Giles Constable outlines the state of Byzantine studies as a field. He cites Paul Lemerle, 'the dean of living Byzantine historians', as stating that Byzantine studies were 'half a century behind classical and western medieval studies' with regard to their methodology and tools.⁹ In his introduction to the same work, Alexander Kazhdan parallels the field of Byzantine studies with western medieval studies, in particular French medievalists of the 'New History school'.¹⁰ These historians emphasised that the 'proper subject' of historical research is that of society and people.¹¹ Kazhdan applies this to Byzantine studies, stating that the subject of modern Byzantine studies must be 'the Byzantine people and their place in society', and issues of politics and diplomacy 'must be reconsidered in light of the interests, intentions, and hopes of these people'.¹² By examining the ideology behind twelfth-century depictions of Alexius, this

⁶ A. Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 165; p. x

⁷ Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic*, pp. 165-166; P. Alexander, 'The Strength of Empire and Capital as Seen through Byzantine Eyes', *Speculum* 37, 1962, pp. 339-557, cited in Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic*, p. 166

⁸ A. Cameron, *The Byzantines*, Malden, MA, 2006, p. 97, cited in Kaldellis, p. 166

⁹ G. Constable, 'Preface', in A. Kazhdan and G. Constable (ed.), *People and Power in Byzantium: An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies*, Washington, D. C., Dumbarton Oaks, 1982, p. 2

¹⁰ A. Kazhdan, 'Introduction', in A. Kazhdan and G. Constable (ed.), *People and Power in Byzantium: An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies*, Washington, D. C., Dumbarton Oaks, 1982, p. 16

¹¹ Kazhdan, *People and Power*, p. 16

¹² Kazhdan, p. 16

dissertation becomes part of this emerging trend in Byzantine studies. To explore this ideology, the ways Alexius's character is presented by Anna Comnena and John Zonaras will be examined.

Methodology

This dissertation will examine the *Alexiad* of Anna Comnena, a biographical epic about Alexius, and the *Epitome Historiarum* of John Zonaras, a universal chronicle that covers Alexius's reign in its final book. These sources are the only twelfth-century histories of Alexius written by authors who knew the emperor and lived through his reign. The *Alexiad* draws from a rich biblical and classical literary tradition to create a glorified image of Alexius as an ideal emperor, while the *Epitome Historiarum* fits into the *Kaiserkritik* genre of unflattering, critical depictions of emperors characteristic of eleventh- and twelfth-century historiography.¹³ The different perspectives of these authors, as well as their personal knowledge of the emperor and his reign, make their works valuable sources for the depiction of imperial character with regard to Alexius.

Both sources offer their own challenges. The *Alexiad* is clearly favourable to Alexius; its author frequently professes her love for her father even while claiming her objectivity as an historian.¹⁴ Michael Angold further raises the point that the *Alexiad* was written decades after Alexius's death, and that 'it has always been recognised' that this delay influenced Anna's portrayal of her father.¹⁵ This delay exaggerated her desire to 'present her father as an ideal ruler' in comparison with Manuel I, and this idealisation 'has always cast a shadow over the value of the *Alexiad* as history'.¹⁶ Julian Chrysostimides points out that a close examination of Anna's evidence and her handling of her material 'exonerates her from any suspicion of distorting evidence'.¹⁷ Anna does not fabricate or distort events in the *Alexiad*, though her admiration of her father clearly influences the way his character is depicted. Beyond questions of its reliability as a source, the *Alexiad* has been the subject of considerable scholarship, much of which is literary in nature. In 1929 and 1972 respectively, Georgina Buckler and Rae Dalven produced studies on the *Alexiad* concerned

¹³ P. Magdalino, 'Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik', *Speculum*, vol. 58, no. 2, 1983, p. 331

¹⁴ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, trans. E. R. A Sewter, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969, pp. 151-152

¹⁵ M. Angold, *The Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204: A political history*, 2nd edn., London, Longman, 1997, p. 5

¹⁶ Angold, *The Byzantine Empire*, p. 5

¹⁷ J. Chrysostimides, 'A Byzantine Historian: Anna Comnena', in D.O Morgan (ed.), *Medieval Historical Writing in the Christian and Islamic Worlds*, London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1982, p. 34

primarily with the life and character of Anna Komnena.¹⁸ More recently, Thalia Gouma-Peterson's 2000 edited collection, *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, sought to fill a gap in scholarship on the *Alexiad* through a collection of essays 'looking at Anna and her *Alexiad* from different disciplinary perspectives'.¹⁹ This scholarship offers valuable insight into Anna's background, motivation, and literary approach when analysing the *Alexiad*.

By comparison, the *Epitome Historiarum* of John Zonaras has not received the same scholarly attention. There is, to date, no existing scholarship in English dedicated solely to the *Epitome Historiarum*, and nor has it been translated into English, save for a small section from Books 12-13.²⁰ Angold addresses this lack of scholarship on the *Epitome Historiarum*, claiming the 'obvious reasons' for scholars' neglect of John Zonaras are a lack of information for both his life and for the circumstances under which he wrote.²¹ He highlights the value of the *Epitome Historiarum* as an independent source for Alexius's reign in evaluating the truth of the *Alexiad*.²² Similarly, Ruth Macrides describes the *Epitome Historiarum* as 'a valuable complement to Anna's *Alexiad*'.²³ The most significant scholarship on John Zonaras is Paul Magdalino's 1983 article 'Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine *Kaiserkritik*', which places John into the *Kaiserkritik* tradition and evaluates his motive and background for writing. Magdalino focuses his analysis on Book 18 of the *Epitome Historiarum* with John's evaluation of Alexius's reign, and highlights the similarities in both content and background between John and other *Kaiserkritik* writers such as Niketas Choniates.²⁴

Both sources have linguistic limitations. Anna Komnena and John Zonaras both write in the Classical Greek exclusive to the educated elite in Constantinople. As Cyril Mango points out, Classical Greek had long ceased to be spoken in the Byzantine Empire, and was a dead language

¹⁸ G. Buckler, *Anna Komnena: A Study*, London, Oxford University Press, 1929; R. Dalven, *Anna Komnena*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1972

¹⁹ T. Gouma-Peterson, 'Preface', in T. Gouma-Peterson (ed.), *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, New York, Garland Publishing, 2000, p. x

²⁰ For this translation: T. Banbich and E. Lane (ed.), *The History of Zonaras: From Alexander Severus to the Death of Theodosius the Great*, London, Routledge, 2009

²¹ M. Angold, 'An Afterword', in M. Mullett and D. Smythe (ed.), *Alexios I Komnenos: Papers*, Belfast, Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations, 1996, p. 400

²² Angold, *Alexios I Komnenos*, p. 399

²³ R. Macrides, 'The Pen and the Sword: Who Wrote the *Alexiad*?', in T. Gouma-Peterson (ed.), *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, New York, Garland Publishing, 2000, p. 73

²⁴ Magdalino, *Speculum*, p. 329

used exclusively for the writing of highbrow literature.²⁵ Mango highlights how writing about contemporary affairs in a dead language ‘inevitably results in the interposition of a certain distance’, and describes the linguistic discrepancy by the reign of Alexius as ‘more pronounced, not to say grotesque’ in comparison to writings of the sixth and seventh centuries.²⁶ This linguistic discrepancy emphasises the fact that neither source can be considered representative of Byzantine culture or thought as a whole. Both these sources belong to an elite literary tradition centred in Constantinople, with strong links to the imperial court.

In a recent publication, Anthony Kaldellis discusses approaches to Byzantine historical writing. He emphasises the need for historians to recognise the individual nature of each Byzantine writer, claiming that in the past it was ‘insufficiently appreciated’ how much modern historians relied on the interpretation of each individual writer for the facts of Byzantine history.²⁷ Kaldellis points out that the ‘rules’ of writing history changes from one text to another, and advocates for an approach that studies each text closely on its own terms.²⁸ This individual approach will be used in analysing the *Alexiad* and the *Epitome Historiarum*, by seeking to determine the motivations, influences, and approaches of Anna Comnena and John Zonaras separately. In addition to this analysis, the *Alexiad* and *Epitome Historiarum* will be placed into the broader context of Byzantine historical writing in the high Middle Ages.

²⁵ C. Mango, *Byzantine Literature as a Distorting Mirror*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, pp. 4-6

²⁶ Mango, *Byzantine Literature*, pp. 6-9

²⁷ A. Kaldellis, ‘The Corpus of Byzantine Historiography: An Interpretive Essay’, in P. Stephenson (ed.), *The Byzantine World*, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 220

²⁸ Kaldellis, *The Byzantine World*, p. 220

Chapter One: Establishing an Imperial Ideal

The early establishment of an imperial ideal in the form of Constantine I, the first Christian emperor, and the emergence of distinct historiographical trends in the tenth and eleventh centuries are key factors that informed the depiction of emperorship in twelfth-century historiography. The concept of a uniquely Byzantine imperial ideal emerges in the fourth century during the reign of Constantine I. Historians such as G.T. Dennis and Harry Magoulias identify the works of Eusebius of Caesarea, and particularly his tricennial orations in praise of Constantine, as Christianising a pagan imperial ideology and forming the basis of a new political orthodoxy that lasted until the end of the empire.²⁹ Eusebius's oration places God at the heart of imperial legitimacy, with Constantine's authority justified through his piety, his closeness with God, and the virtues gifted to him by God that enable him to rule. This creates a sense of 'legitimacy through virtue'. The model of Constantine as the ideal emperor grows in prominence in Byzantine writing from the seventh through to the tenth centuries; Paul Magdalino identifies a 'cult' of Constantine emerging during this period.³⁰ This is reflected in imperially commissioned historical works during the tenth-century reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, such as the *Theophanes Continuatus*, which see emperors of antiquity such as Constantine I and Augustus held up as ideals. While Constantine I himself remains an influential model of emperorship, the movement towards more critical depictions of emperors in eleventh-century historiography highlights a shift in the importance of virtue. In contrast with the Eusebian idea of legitimacy through virtue, the emperor's divinely-gifted right to rule is infallible, and an historian may criticise his emperor's character without questioning his authority.

Eusebius's praise of Constantine I in the fourth century set a standard for imperial virtue that remained significant throughout the Byzantine Empire. In his *Oratio de laudibus Constantini*, Eusebius presents Constantine as a ruler on earth parallel to God: 'the sovereign dear to God, in imitation of the Higher Power, directs the helm and sets straight all things on earth'.³¹ Referring

²⁹ G. T. Dennis, 'Imperial Panegyric: Rhetoric and Reality', in H. Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, Washington D.C., Dumbarton Oaks, 1997, p. 132; H. J. Magoulias, *Byzantine Christianity: Empire, Church and the West*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1982, p. 6

³⁰ P. Magdalino, 'Introduction', in P. Magdalino (ed.), *New Constantines: the Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th-13th Centuries*, Hampshire, Variorum, 1994, pp. 3-4

³¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, 'In Praise of Constantine', trans. H. A. Drake, in H. A. Drake (ed.), *In Praise of Constantine: A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1975, p. 85

consistently to Constantine as God's 'friend', Eusebius continues to parallel the rule of God in heaven with that of Constantine on earth.³² As emperor, Constantine 'summons the whole human race to knowledge of the Higher Power, calling in a great voice that all can hear and proclaiming for everyone on earth the laws of genuine piety'.³³ His authority is justified within a Christian context through his role in bringing his subjects to 'knowledge and reverence' of God.³⁴ The 'natural virtues' of the emperor come from a pagan tradition,³⁵ however Eusebius Christianises these virtues by linking them back to God:

His ability to reason has come from the Universal Logos, his wisdom from communion with Wisdom, goodness from contact with the Good, and justness from his association with Justice. He is prudent in the ideal of Prudence, and from sharing in the Highest Power has he courage.³⁶

Eusebius presents virtue as a road to legitimacy. In contrast to the ideal ruler, Constantine, Eusebius describes a ruler who has 'alienated himself' from these virtues, as falling instead into the 'deadly poison of sin', folly, irrationality, selfishness, bloodthirstiness, enmity to God, and impiety.³⁷ Such a ruler 'may be considered to rule by despotic power' but will never hold the title of sovereign with 'true reason'.³⁸ There are two aspects to God's gift of sovereignty to Constantine: while God granted authority, longevity and military success, He also enabled Constantine to rule with legitimacy through his virtue. Claudia Rapp emphasises this point regarding the sacrality of the imperial office: the emperor only held this office, gifted to him by God, as long as he ruled with 'justice, philanthropy and piety'.³⁹ Eusebius emphasises Constantine's role in leading prayer and sacrifices on behalf of his subjects,⁴⁰ a theme picked up by later historians.

The importance of piety as a central element to imperial virtue remained strong in historical writing following Constantine's reign, and later centuries saw him become a model of imperial virtue. Writers of contemporary church histories focused on the emperor's power of prayer in their

³² Eusebius, *In Praise of Constantine*, pp. 85-86

³³ Eusebius, p. 86

³⁴ Eusebius, p. 86

³⁵ H. A. Drake, 'Notes', in H. A. Drake (ed.), *In Praise of Constantine: A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1975, p. 161

³⁶ Eusebius, *Oratio*, p. 86

³⁷ Eusebius, p. 89

³⁸ Eusebius, p. 89

³⁹ C. Rapp, 'Comparison, Paradigm and the Case of Moses in Panegyric and Hagiography', in M. Whitby (ed.), *The Propaganda of Power: The Role of Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, Leiden, Brill, 1998, pp. 281-282

⁴⁰ Eusebius, *Oratio*, p. 86

discussion of the piety of Theodosius I and Arcadius, which Rapp highlights as reminiscent of the traditional ‘arch-priest’ role in Jewish and Hellenistic kingship.⁴¹ The *Church History* of Socrates, featuring an account of the reign of Theodosius II, is concerned predominantly with the emperor’s piety and is hagiographical in nature.⁴² A story in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* describing Theodosius II as equal to an ascetic with regard to piety is identified by Rapp as presenting the emperor as the image of the perfect prince, in control of his passions and the ‘embodiment of virtues’.⁴³ Hagiographical models, as well as direct comparisons to biblical figures such as David and Moses, were used to express the sanctity and piety of Christian emperors in late antiquity.⁴⁴ Paul Magdalino identifies Constantine himself becoming a figure of hagiography from the seventh to the tenth century, coinciding with the rise of his cult.⁴⁵ The Emperor Heraclius (610-641) established the name Constantine as the prevailing name of his dynasty, which Magdalino suggests was an attempt to connect the seventh-century emperors with an ‘era of imperial greatness and orthodoxy’.⁴⁶ Constantine’s continued importance as a model of imperial virtue reveals the centrality of piety and orthodoxy to the ideal of emperorship from late antiquity and through the early Middle Ages.

The tenth century saw a number of significant Byzantine historical works, ranging in tone from imperially commissioned propaganda pieces to critical biographies of rulers. Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (945-959) sponsored a number of historical works in the early years of his reign which took the form of biographical accounts intended as a continuation of the *Chronographia* of Theophanes.⁴⁷ Two anonymous writers contributed to this work, known as *Theophanes Continuatus*, encompassing biographies of Leo V, Michael II, Theophilus, Michael III, and Basil I, who was the grandfather of Constantine VII and founder of the Macedonian dynasty.⁴⁸ There is a clear propaganda purpose, with James Howard-Johnston pointing out the ‘higher stylistic level’ of Basil I’s biography as compared to the others, which was written as an *encomium*, a work of

⁴¹ Rapp, *Propaganda of Power*, p. 283

⁴² Rapp, p. 283

⁴³ Rapp, p. 285

⁴⁴ Rapp, p. 286

⁴⁵ Magdalino, *New Constantines*, pp. 3-4

⁴⁶ Magdalino, p. 5

⁴⁷ J. Howard-Johnston, ‘The Chronicle and Other Forms of Historical Writing in Byzantium’, *The Medieval Chronicle*, vol. 10, 2015, p. 11

⁴⁸ Howard-Johnston, *Medieval Chronicle*, pp. 11-12

praise, modelled on a lost life of Augustus.⁴⁹ The links Howard-Johnston identifies in this history between Augustus and Basil I fit in with a broader association between the Macedonian dynasty and emperors of antiquity. Similarly, Magdalino identifies a ‘Macedonian Renaissance’ that regarded Constantine I as the first in a series of ‘larger than life’ antique emperors, a concept integral to the dynasty’s imperial ideology.⁵⁰

This importance of Constantine I to the Macedonian dynasty’s perception of ideal emperorship can be seen clearly in the *De administrando imperio*. This work was attributed to Constantine VII and written as a handbook for his son, and includes extensive historical detail on Byzantium’s neighbours as well as the empire itself. The work includes references to curses engraved by Constantine I on a table in the Hagia Sophia warning against various improper behaviours by emperors, with punishments ranging from excommunication to death.⁵¹ Detailed anecdotal examples of the various punishments suffered by transgressors are also provided.⁵² The *De administrando imperio* reveals an ongoing association between Constantine I and exemplary imperial virtue in the tenth century, and elevates Constantine I from not only a model of imperial virtue but an enforcer, through supernatural means, of the standards for an emperor’s moral conduct.

In addition to histories sponsored by the Macedonian dynasty, the tenth century saw the emergence of works that directly criticised the characters and personal lives of emperors. A notable example is the *History* of Leo the Deacon, written at the end of the tenth century, concerning the emperors Nicephorus Phocas (963-969) and John Tzimiskes (969-976). While Leo praises these emperors for their military accomplishments, he expresses ‘nothing but scorn’ for their personal lives in the palace, and details their immoralities and weaknesses.⁵³ A. Markopoulos suggests that Leo’s approach, particularly when contrasted with that of his near-contemporary Constantine VII, signifies the ‘ideological underpinnings of a new era with its own distinct intellectual processes’.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Howard-Johnston, *Medieval Chronicle*, p. 12

⁵⁰ Magdalino, *New Constantines*, p. 5

⁵¹ Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, trans. R. J. H Jenkins, Washington, D.C., Dumbarton Oaks, 1967, pp. 68-77

⁵² Constantine VII, *De administrando imperio*, pp. 68-77

⁵³ A. Markopoulos, ‘From Narrative History to Historical Biography. New Trends in Byzantine Historical Writing in the 10th – 11th Centuries’, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, vol. 102, no. 2, 2009, p. 706

⁵⁴ Markopoulos, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, p. 706

While the emperor's ability to defend the empire is still celebrated in Leo's work, his character is recognised as human and flawed.

The eleventh-century *Chronographia* of Michael Psellus is a well-known and influential example of historiography that was critical of its imperial subjects' characters. The influence of Psellus in particular on twelfth-century historiography is clear, with both Anna Comnena and John Zonaras using him as a source. Psellus distances himself from the genre of formal historiography, particularly the concern with presenting good examples, and therefore is more free to present his subjects in a less than positive light.⁵⁵ Markopoulos describes Psellus as having a tendency to 'demystify his heroes' and linger more on their weaknesses than their strengths.⁵⁶ The difference between his criticism of emperors such as Constantine Monomachos in the *Chronographia* and his praise of the same in panegyric has prompted comment from Dennis, who attributes this disparity to the belief that whatever panegyrists thought of his character, 'the position of the emperor was sacred and worthy of all praise'.⁵⁷ This separation between the person and the office of the emperor is echoed by Alexander Kazhdan and Giles Constable, who identify Byzantine historians as 'severely criticizing their celestial rulers', regarding their flaws as deviations from the ideal emperor, yet believing wholeheartedly in the political system and the imperial office.⁵⁸ Criticism of individual emperors and their characters did not, therefore, reflect a greater dissatisfaction with the institution of emperorship. This attitude reveals a significant departure from the Eusebian idea that an emperor's personal virtue legitimises him for imperial office.

The Christianised imperial ideal presented by Eusebius in the fourth century had a profound and lasting impact on depictions of emperorship in Byzantine historiography, particularly through the use of Constantine I as a model of imperial piety. Eusebius's emphasis on Constantine's divinely gifted and maintained emperorship forms a lasting impression in Byzantine thought: the imperial office is legitimised through God and is therefore beyond reproach. The criticism of the characters of emperors by writers such as Leo the Deacon and Michael Psellus, however, indicates a shift away from the concept of legitimacy through God-given virtue. The character of the emperor was no longer linked to his worthiness and right to rule, and historians grew increasingly comfortable

⁵⁵ Markopoulos, p. 711

⁵⁶ Markopoulos, p. 711

⁵⁷ Dennis, *Byzantine Court Culture*, p. 134

⁵⁸ Kazhdan and Constable, *People and Power in Byzantium*, p. 35

with criticising emperors for their personal and moral failings. Despite the growth of critical historiography, however, the Constantinian model of a great and righteous emperor continued to prove influential into the twelfth century. Anna Comnena's *Alexiad* draws, at least in part, from a long-established literary tradition that glorifies the image of the Christian emperor.

Chapter Two: The Ideal Emperor: Alexius in Anna Comnena's *Alexiad*

The *Alexiad* of Anna Comnena differs significantly from other works of Byzantine historiography, and offers a marked contrast to the critical works emerging in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The work is set apart by the unique position of its author as a *porphyrogenete*, a woman born into royalty, the eldest daughter of her subject Alexius I Comnenus. While the *Alexiad*, along with its author, has been the subject of considerable scholarship, the way it constructs an image of Alexius as the ideal emperor has remained unexamined. Anna's worldview is shaped by her extensive education and her role within the imperial family, both of which inform her concept of ideal emperorship. Anna echoes the Constantinian model in discussing Alexius's piety and his role in leading the church, but her combination of contemporary and early Byzantine imperial ideals, her privileged position, and her overtly Classical, Homeric style means that she constructs a view of emperorship that is unique in Byzantine historiography. Her Alexius exemplifies both a Christian and a heroic ideal of emperorship. Anna's writing does not reflect the contemporary ideology that criticised the personal characteristics of emperors. Instead, it places Alexius into a far wider, universal context of idealised emperorship by drawing on ancient exemplars from the Biblical and the Classical tradition.

The uniqueness of the *Alexiad* within the Byzantine historiographical tradition reflects its author's unique circumstances and worldview. Anna Comnena is the sole female Byzantine historian,⁵⁹ remarkable in her closeness to her subject, and renowned for a level of education unparalleled among Byzantine women in her time.⁶⁰ Anna's contemporaries highlight her level of education: John Zonaras describes her as pursuing education more than her husband, the Caesar Nicephorus Byrennius, and having 'a keenest mind towards the height of theorems'.⁶¹ Nicetas Chionates reports that she 'had received the broadest education and was versed in all the sciences and in philosophy'.⁶² Anna herself prioritises her learning in the preface to the *Alexiad*, introducing herself as 'the daughter of the rulers Alexius and Irene, born and raised in the purple, not bereft of learning', before going on to describe her education in literature, rhetoric and the *quadrivium* of

⁵⁹ D. M. Nicol, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Byzantine Empire*, London, Seaby, 1991, p. 9

⁶⁰ Dalven, *Anna Comnena*, p. 17

⁶¹ John Zonaras, *Epitome Historiarum*, vol. 4, Leipzig, B. G Teubner, 1872, p. 251, cited in R. Dalven, *Anna Comnena*, p. 74

⁶² Nicetas Chionates, *Historia*, trans. P. S. Costas, cited in R. Dalven, p. 74

sciences.⁶³ Rae Dalven highlights her three greatest intellectual pursuits as the classics, the Bible, and medicine, which ‘molded her moral precepts, her philosophy of life, and her approach to history’.⁶⁴ Her learnedness is reflected in the unprecedented literary merit of the *Alexiad*, which Julian Chrysostomides describes as ‘perhaps the greatest’ of Byzantine historiography,⁶⁵ while Jakov Ljubarskij points to the general consideration of Anna as ‘one of the best prose-writers of Byzantine literature’.⁶⁶ The *Alexiad* is therefore an exceptional work by an exceptional author when considered within the corpus of Byzantine historiography.

The most distinctive literary feature of the *Alexiad* is its distinctly Homeric style. While Classical influences and references were popular in Byzantine literature, particularly during the Classical revival of the twelfth century,⁶⁷ the *Alexiad* is unique in not only incorporating Homeric references but also in following an epic structure, focus, and use of language. The style of the *Alexiad* recalls the ancient heroic past of Homeric epic, which, along with its numerous references to classical tragedy and philosophy, contribute to the construction of a distinctly Greek, classically-influenced ideal of rulership. Radislav Katičić attributes the epic character of the *Alexiad* to ‘an inner disposition and the manner of thought of the writer’,⁶⁸ and Dalven concludes that Anna’s ‘epic spirit’ is not humanistic but a ‘Byzantine Christianized adaptation of the pagan epic of ancient Greece’.⁶⁹

The epic style of the *Alexiad* is not merely a literary feature, but a reflection of Anna’s worldview and the centrality of Alexius to this worldview. Ljubarskij points out the extensive use of Homeric references in Byzantine literature as a whole, and particularly the work of the later twelfth-century writer Nicetas Choniates, who included 191 Homeric references in his *History*.⁷⁰ The *Alexiad* is

⁶³ ‘ταῦτα δὲ διεγνωκυῖα ἐγὼ Ἄννα, θυγάτηρ μὲν τῶν βασιλέων Ἀλεξίου καὶ Εἰρήνης, πορφύρας τιθήνημά τε καὶ γέννημα, οὐ γραμμάτων οὐκ ἄμειρος, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ Ἑλληνίζειν ἐς ἄκρον ἐσπουδακυῖα καὶ ῥητορικῆς οὐκ ἀμελετήτως ἔχουσα καὶ τὰς Ἀριστοτελικὰς τέχνας εὖ ἀναλεξαμένη καὶ τοὺς Πλάτωνος διαλόγους καὶ τὸν νοῦν ἀπὸ τῆς τετρακτύος τῶν μαθημάτων πυκάσασα’, Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, vol. 1, B. Leib (ed.), Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1967, p. 3

⁶⁴ Dalven, *Anna Comnena*, p. 75

⁶⁵ Chrysostomides, *Medieval Historical Writing*, p. 30

⁶⁶ J. Ljubarskij, ‘Why is the *Alexiad* a Masterpiece of Byzantine Literature?’ in T. Gouma-Peterson (ed.), *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, New York, Garland Publishing, 2000, p. 169

⁶⁷ A. Laiou, ‘Introduction: Why Anna Komnene?’ in T. Gouma-Peterson (ed.), *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, New York, Garland Publishing, 2000, p. 5

⁶⁸ R. Katičić, ‘I Archaiotheia kai to Epikon Pnevma eis tin *Alexiada* tis Annis tis Komninis’, in *Epetiris Etaireias Byzantinon Spoudon*, vol. 29, Athens, 1959, pp. 81-86, cited in R. Dalven, *Anna Comnena*, p. 77

⁶⁹ Dalven, p. 76

⁷⁰ Ljubarskij, *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, p. 171

not unique for its epic references, but for what Ljubarskij calls its ‘Homeric air’, and in particular the casting of Alexius in the *Alexiad* in the same central role that Achilles occupies in Homer’s *Iliad*.⁷¹ Alexius is not directly likened to the character of Achilles in the *Alexiad*, but he, like Achilles, is ‘the figure uniting all the episodes of the history’.⁷²

The centrality of Alexius in the narrative of the *Alexiad* is a direct reflection of the centrality of the empire in the Byzantine worldview, resulting in a conflation between the emperor’s character and his role as head of state. Angeliki Laiou highlights the ‘near-identification of [Anna’s] father with the state’ as unique to the *Alexiad*, and suggests a merging between the role of the state and the ‘individual who somehow embodies it’.⁷³ The central role in history belongs to the state, but Alexius’s role as head of state allows him centrality in Anna’s narrative: ‘Her hero, her father, the emperor, stands, like the state, at the center; wave upon wave of outsiders buffet him, and he reacts; his actions and reactions form the narrative’.⁷⁴ The centrality of the empire is a common aspect of the contemporary Byzantine worldview, but Anna’s conflation of the empire with the character of the emperor is unique, especially when considered alongside the tendency in tenth- and eleventh-century historiography to separate the character of the emperor from the legitimacy of his office.

The centrality of the hero to the epic narrative is one way in which Anna’s imitation of Homeric epic expresses the importance of her father’s role. In addition, the epic style of the *Alexiad* recalls an ancient Homeric society that predates Classical democracy and the concept of the *polis*. Homeric kingship is individualistic and closely linked to the character of the *basileus*;⁷⁵ in drawing her parallel between Achilles and Alexius, Anna suggests Alexius’s struggles are similarly personal. Alexius’s emperorship becomes a part of his personal narrative, with Anna referring to battles and other state affairs as ‘labours’ (*athloi*)⁷⁶ and comparing her father to Hercules: ‘For if someone were to call Basilacius an Erymanthian boar, and my father Alexius a most noble

⁷¹ Ljubarskij, pp. 171-172

⁷² Ljubarskij, p. 172

⁷³ Laiou, *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, pp. 6-7

⁷⁴ Laiou, p. 7

⁷⁵ D. Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics: The Performance of Political Thought*, Norman, OK, University of Oklahoma Press, 2002, p. 82

⁷⁶ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, vol. 1, p. 36

Hercules of our time, he would not miss the mark in terms of truth'.⁷⁷ Within the classically-inspired narrative of the *Alexiad*, Alexius is cast in the role of hero rather than statesman.

While the *Alexiad* has clear stylistic influences derived from Homeric epic, Anna's education is also shown through the extensive use of Biblical quotations, allusions, and references. Through these references and comparisons to Biblical figures, Anna emphasises Alexius's piety, his relationship with God, and his role as a spiritual leader. Her focus on the devout and pious aspects of Alexius's character aligns him, in matters of faith, with the imperial ideal established by Eusebius and the model of Constantine I, and exalts his Christian virtues above those of his predecessors. Throughout the *Alexiad*, Georgina Buckler counts two references to the Apocrypha, forty to the Old Testament, and forty-five to the New.⁷⁸ Of these references, twelve are direct quotations, seventeen refer to Biblical figures, and the rest are figures of speech or common phrases.⁷⁹ Anna criticises Alexius for allowing his troops to plunder Constantinople, referring to it as a 'loss of all sense (*aponoia*)',⁸⁰ and draws a comparison to Saul, saying the same thing befell him: 'For God, tearing it apart, destroyed his kingdom because of the recklessness of the king'.⁸¹ Despite her criticism, Anna uses the incident to illustrate Alexius's piety through his fear of God's wrath, his grief at the soldiers' plunder, and the penance he undertook for his mistake.⁸² Anna uses biblical precedent to defend Alexius's decision to fund military campaigns with church money, saying that even King David had defied sacred canons out of necessity.⁸³ In discussing Alexius's victory over the Scythians, Anna directly quotes a verse from Deuteronomy: 'How could one man chase a thousand, or two men displace ten thousand?'⁸⁴ This makes clear not only Alexius's association with Old Testament figures, but also the role divine favour played in his military victories. Alexius was devout, trusting in God; God, in turn, rewarded him with his successes. The majority of direct comparisons between Alexius and Old Testament figures occur in the context of

⁷⁷ 'ἄν γάρ τις Ἐρυμάνθιον κάπρον τὸν Βασιλάκιον τοῦτον καλέσειεν, Ἡρακλέα δέ τινα καθ' ἡμᾶς γενναιότατον τὸν ἐμὸν πατέρα Ἀλέξιον, οὐκ ἂν ἀμάρτοιτο τῆς ἀληθείας.' Anna Comnena, p. 36

⁷⁸ Buckler, *Anna Comnena*, p. 194

⁷⁹ Buckler, p. 194

⁸⁰ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 116

⁸¹ 'καὶ γὰρ ὁ Θεὸς διὰ τὸ βασιλέως ἀτάσθαλον διαρρήσων διέρρηξε τὴν βασιλείαν αὐτοῦ.' Anna Comnena, p. 117; cf. 'καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτὸν Σαμουὴλ Διέρρηξεν κύριος τὴν βασιλείαν Ἰσραὴλ ἐκ χειρὸς σου σήμερον καὶ δώσει αὐτὴν τῷ πλησίον σου τῷ ἀγαθῷ ὑπὲρ σέ', 1 Samuel 15:28, Septuagint, A. Rahlfs and R. Hanhart (ed.), 2nd edn., Stuttgart, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006

⁸² Anna Comnena, pp. 116-118

⁸³ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, vol. 2, p. 47

⁸⁴ 'πῶς διώξεται εἷς χιλίους καὶ δύο μετακινήσουσι μυριάδας', Anna Comnena, p. 132; cf. 'πῶς διώξεται εἷς χιλίους καὶ δύο μετακινήσουσιν μυριάδας', Deuteronomy 32:30, Septuagint

military campaigns, stressing the association between Alexius and the Old Testament kings whose victories were awarded by God as a direct result of their faith and obedience. In battle against the Turks, Anna describes Alexius leading his troops as a ‘pillar of fire’ (*stylos pyros*),⁸⁵ emphasising his role in leadership and guidance. The emperor’s responsibility for the spiritual wellbeing of his subjects is made clear in Anna’s account of her father’s battle against heresy, particularly that of the Manichaeans and the Bogomils.

It is in the context of the Bogomil heresy that Anna makes a direct comparison between Alexius and Constantine I:

I indeed would call [Alexius] the thirteenth apostle, and yet some grant that honour to Constantine the Great; it seems good to me to either rank him alongside the emperor Constantine, or, if someone argued with that, let Alexius follow Constantine both as apostle and emperor.⁸⁶

This passage makes clear the connection between Alexius and the model of Byzantine imperial perfection, Constantine I. With regard to his piety and the spiritual protection of his subjects, the *Alexiad* aligns Alexius with the enduring imperial ideal set by Eusebius.

Alexius further epitomises Christian virtue through his charity and clemency, both of which Anna stresses. In discussing Alexius’s charitable works, in particular the establishment of the great Orphanage, Anna draws further comparisons between Alexius and King Solomon,⁸⁷ and even Jesus himself.⁸⁸ She includes countless examples of Alexius’s mercy towards his enemies, including a would-be assassin, to whom Alexius granted freedom, a full pardon, and ‘magnificent gifts’.⁸⁹ Anna emphasises the exceptionality of this aspect of Alexius’s character, saying that his government and administration were ‘in all ways more gentle and humane’⁹⁰ and that ‘with regard to imperial character, which has for a long time forsaken the nature of emperorship of the Romans, he and he alone returned it in some way; from then, for the first time, it was welcomed as a guest

⁸⁵ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, vol. 3, p. 204; cf. ‘τὴν δὲ νύκτα ἐν στύλῳ πυρός’, Exodus 13:21-22, *Septuagint*

⁸⁶ ‘καὶ ἐγώ γε τοῦτον τρισκαίδεκατον ἂν ἀπόστολον ὀνομάσαιμι. καίτοι τινὲς Κωνσταντίνῳ τῷ μεγάλῳ τοῦτο τὸ κλέος προσάπτουσιν, ἐμοὶ δὲ δοκεῖ ἢ σὺν τῷ Κωνσταντίνῳ τῷ αὐτοκράτορι τετάχθαι τοῦτον, ἢ εἰ τις φιλωεικεῖ, ἔστω μετὰ γε Κωνσταντίνον ἀπόστολος ἅμα καὶ βασιλεὺς ὁ Ἀλέξιος.’ Anna Comnena, p. 181

⁸⁷ Anna Comnena, p. 215

⁸⁸ Anna Comnena, p. 216

⁸⁹ ‘παντελοῦς ἀφέσεως ὁ φονεὺς ἐκεῖνος παραχρῆμα τυγχάνει στρατιώτης, οὐκ ἀφέσεως δὲ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ μεγίστων δωρεῶν’, Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, vol. 2, p. 177

⁹⁰ ‘καίτοι τοῦ βασιλέως ἅπαντα πρὸς τὸ ἡμερώτερον καὶ φιλανθρωπότερον ἐπιτροπεύοντος καὶ οἰκονομουμένου τὰ πράγματα’, Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, vol. 3, p. 67

by the emperor of the Romans'.⁹¹ There is something of a contradiction here: Anna says Alexius 'returns' imperial character after a long absence, then suggests his reign is the 'first time' such a character is seen. Anna makes no direct comparisons throughout this section, instead making a vague reference to the distant past. The implication is that this 'imperial character' has been missing for most of Roman history, and has returned only during the reign of Alexius. Given her extensive education and use of references throughout the *Alexiad*, her lack of direct comparison is telling. While Alexius's individual qualities can be compared to those of his predecessors, such as his piety being equal to Constantine I, the 'imperial character' as the sum of all desirable qualities exists, according to Anna, only in Alexius.

Anna's position of being 'born and raised in the purple' further sets her apart from other Byzantine historians, a group comprised of civil servants and clergymen.⁹² Anna's closeness to her subject and her involvement in court politics has a profound effect on her worldview and the way she evaluates Alexius's character and morality. As Alexius's eldest daughter, she played an active role in the life of the court, and Dalven points out her thorough knowledge of people and diplomatic proceedings as evidence of her involvement.⁹³ Anna herself states that she and her siblings were present for many of the events she reports, as they accompanied their parents.⁹⁴ In particular, this involvement influenced her representation of Alexius's use of cunning and trickery. Anna refers frequently and positively to this aspect of Alexius's character, discussing how he surpassed others in inventive skill,⁹⁵ and his use of cunning (*technê*) and contrivance (*mêchanê*) in military matters.⁹⁶ She further emphasises this point by stating that victory is not always won militarily, but that another way was possible to 'defeat the enemy by fraud,'⁹⁷ and Alexius employed this tactic at a particular time.⁹⁸ Dalven points to this praise of trickery and deceit in evaluating Anna's morality. In particular, Dalven highlights how Anna's moral standards reflect her position within

⁹¹ 'καὶ ἔγωγ' ἂν φαίην θαρρούντως περὶ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἐκείνου, ὥς ἄρα τοῦ βασιλικοῦ χαρακτῆρος, πολλοῦ χρόνου καταλειπόμενος τὰ τῶν Ῥωμαίων βασιλεία, ἐπ' αὐτοῦ καὶ μόνου ἐπανεληλυθέναι τρόπον τινὰ τότε πρώτως τῇ Ῥωμαίων ἡγεμονίᾳ ἐπιξενουμένου.' Anna Comnena, p. 68.

⁹² Mango, *Byzantine Literature*, pp. 4-5

⁹³ Dalven, *Anna Comnena*, p. 85

⁹⁴ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, vol. 3, p. 174

⁹⁵ 'εὐμηχανία παρὰ πολὺ ἡττάτο τοῦμοῦ πατρὸς Ἀλεξίου', Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, vol. 1, p. 11; 'ἦν γὰρ εἴπερ τις ἄλλος ἐφευρετὴς καὶ πόρους ἐν τοῖς ἀπορωτάτοις ζυμμηχανώμενος', *Alexiad*, p. 11

⁹⁶ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 19

⁹⁷ 'καὶ ἄλλως ἔστιν οὗ ῥαδιουργοῦντα τὸν ἐχθρὸν καταγωνίζεσθαι', Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, vol. 3, p. 101

⁹⁸ Anna Comnena, p. 101

the imperial family.⁹⁹ Anna's morality 'naturally reflects the standards' of the landowning military aristocracy to which the Comneni belonged, and her involvement in the court ensured she was aware of the intrigue of other members of this aristocracy for the Byzantine throne.¹⁰⁰ Deceit and trickery were the weapons of both Byzantium's enemies and would-be contenders for the throne,¹⁰¹ and Alexius's use of the same devices was to Anna not a sign of moral corruption but of wise and prudent rulership. The political devices Alexius employs to maintain his rule form part of Anna's portrait of the ideal emperor.

The unique position held by the *Alexiad* in the Byzantine historiographical tradition creates a distinct image of the imperial ideal. Anna Comnena's involvement in court politics, her role within the imperial family, and her extensive education in Classical and Biblical studies ensure her worldview is shaped differently to that of her contemporaries. These factors inform her approach to writing the *Alexiad*, the style in which she writes, and the ways she evaluates her father's character. She draws from ancient examples, recalling the worlds of Homeric epic and the Old Testament, to place Alexius into a universal context of rulership and to emphasise his heroism and piety. Her position as a *porphyrogenete* and closeness to the imperial court further influence her worldview, and see the addition of cunning, trickery and deceit to her concept of the ideal ruler. Anna constructs a new imperial ideal, informed by ancient examples from Classical and Biblical tradition, the ongoing legacy of Constantine I, and a strong sense of practicality, and therefore presents him as without equal. Anna's worldview and approach set her apart from both her eleventh-century predecessors and her contemporary, John Zonaras.

⁹⁹ Dalven, *Anna Comnena*, p. 79

¹⁰⁰ Dalven, p. 79

¹⁰¹ Dalven, pp. 79-80

Chapter Three: Imperial Criticism in the *Epitome Historiarum*

The *Epitome Historiarum* of John Zonaras offers a markedly different assessment of Alexius's reign and character to that of Anna Comnena. John clearly differentiates between the expectations for a private individual and for an emperor. He judges Alexius separately according to these different standards. Both his approach and his conclusions differ from Anna's. This is shown most notably in his discussion of Alexius's financial decisions. The *Epitome Historiarum* fits clearly into the contemporary historiographical tradition of *Kaiserkritik*, and John's criticism of Alexius bears resemblance to criticisms made by other eleventh- and twelfth-century historians. John's social position and his experience under the Comneni both influence his views on the imperial office. His 'ideal' of emperorship is informed, above all, by practical considerations of the requirements of the state.

John wrote the *Epitome Historiarum*, a universal chronicle beginning with the creation of the world, as a continuation of John Skylitzes' chronicle which terminated in 1059.¹⁰² In addition, the work incorporated material from John Malalas, George Monomachos, and Michael Psellus.¹⁰³ His original contribution is found in Book 18 with the description and evaluation of Alexius I's reign, and the work finishes in 1118 with Alexius's death. The *Epitome Historiarum* was a well-known work, indicated by a large number of surviving manuscripts.¹⁰⁴ John himself served as a *droungarios* of the watch, a member of the judiciary, during Alexius's reign, and wrote the *Epitome Historiarum* during his retirement at a monastery on the island of St Glykeria.¹⁰⁵ He was known as an expert in canon law.¹⁰⁶ He seems to have fallen out of favour with the Comnenian dynasty following Alexius's death, leading to his retirement;¹⁰⁷ Paul Magdalino goes as far as to suggest he was in exile.¹⁰⁸ While the exact circumstances are unclear, John's critical account of Alexius's reign and his departure from Constantinople certainly supports the idea that he left on bad terms with the Comneni.

¹⁰² Angold, *The Byzantine Empire*, p. 2

¹⁰³ C. Stavrakos, 'Zonaras, Ioannes', in G. Dunphy (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, Leiden, Brill, 2010, p. 1544

¹⁰⁴ Stavrakos, *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, p. 1544

¹⁰⁵ Angold, *The Byzantine Empire*, p. 2; Howard-Johnston, *The Medieval Chronicle*, p. 9

¹⁰⁶ Howard-Johnston, p. 9

¹⁰⁷ Howard-Johnston, p. 9

¹⁰⁸ Magdalino, *Speculum*, p. 333

John separates his evaluation of Alexius's character into two parts: the first concerned with his personality and traits as a man, and the second in light of his role as emperor. In the first section, John describes Alexius in quite positive terms, saying that he was not disdainful and pretentious,¹⁰⁹ had no anger in his heart,¹¹⁰ was prone to compassion, slow to anger, moderate in character, and agreeable.¹¹¹ He goes on to state that Alexius's character, including his moderate customs, goodness, unchanging spirit, and self-control, were 'sufficient for a private person'.¹¹² Alexius, however, is not a private person, and the standards for his character are correspondingly higher. In the second part of his evaluation, John outlines the required characteristics for an emperor: a care for justice, the consideration of one's subjects, and the protection of the old customs of government.¹¹³ He goes on to describe how Alexius has failed in all three regards, because 'the greatest care to him became the alteration of the ancient customs of the state'.¹¹⁴ Alexius failed to honour the members of the council or provide for them accordingly, but instead rushed to humble them.¹¹⁵ He 'was not guarding the virtue of justice in all things'¹¹⁶, which John equates with distributing to each person according to their individual worth.¹¹⁷ This last point forms the basis of John's most significant criticism of Alexius:

He handed over to his relatives and some of his servants, with entire wagons, money belonging to the people, and to those same he assigned abundant yearly allowances, so that they could surround themselves with great wealth and appoint staff of their own, appropriate not to private persons but kings, and acquire homes looking like cities in magnitude and not unlike palaces in extravagance. To the rest of the well-born he did not show similar favour.¹¹⁸

¹⁰⁹ 'οὐθ' ὑπεροπτικός τε καὶ ἀλαζών', John Zonaras, *Epitome Historiarum*, vol. 4, ed. L. Dindorf, Leipzig, B. G. Teubner, 1871, p. 258

¹¹⁰ 'οὔτε μὴν ὀξύς εἰς θυμόν', Zonaras, *Epitome Historiarum*, p. 258

¹¹¹ 'πρὸς ἔλεον εὐκατάφορος, πρὸς κόλασιν οὐκ ὀξύρροπος, μέτριος τὸ ἦθος, εὐπρόσιτος', Zonaras, p. 258

¹¹² 'ιδιώτη μὲν γὰρ ἀπόχρη καὶ μέτριον ἦθος, καὶ ἐπιείκεια καὶ τὸ πρὸς θυμόν οὐκ εὐκίνητον καὶ τὸ σῶφρον τὸ πρὸς τὴν δίκαιαν', Zonaras, p. 259

¹¹³ 'βασιλεῖ δὲ πρὸς τούτοις καὶ ἡ τῆς δικαιοσύνης φροντίς καὶ ἡ τῶν ὑπηκόων, προμήθεια καὶ ἡ τῶν παλαιῶν ἐθῶν τοῦ πολιτεύματος τήρησις', Zonaras, p. 259

¹¹⁴ 'τῷ δὲ μέλημα μᾶλλον ἢ τῶν ἀρχαίων ἐθῶν γέγονε τῆς πολιτείας ἀλλοίωσις', Zonaras, p. 259

¹¹⁵ 'καὶ τοὺς τῆς συγκλήτου βουλῆς οὔτε τιμῆς ἥς ἐχρῆν ἡξίου οὔτε πρόνοιαν αὐτῶν ἐτίθετο κατὰ τὸ ἀνάλογον, μᾶλλον μὲντοι καὶ ἔσπευσε ταπεινῶσαι τούτους', Zonaras, p. 259

¹¹⁶ 'ἀλλ' οὐδ' ἐν ἅπασιν τὴν τῆς δικαιοσύνης ἥν τηρῶν ἀρετὴν', Zonaras, p. 259

¹¹⁷ 'ταύτης γὰρ ἴδιον τὸ τοῦ κατ' ἀξίαν ἐκαστῷ διανεμητικόν', Zonaras, p. 259

¹¹⁸ 'ὁ δὲ τοῖς μὲν συγγενέσι καὶ τῶν θεραπόντων τισὶν ἀμάξαις ὅλαις παρεῖχε τὰ δημόσια χρήματα καὶ χορηγίας ἐκείνοις ἀδράς ἐτησίους ἀπένειμε, ὥς καὶ πλοῦτον περιβαλέσθαι βαθὺν καὶ ὑπηρεσίαν ἑαυτοῖς ἀποτάξαι, οὐκ ιδιώταις ἀλλὰ βασιλεῦσι κατάλληλον, καὶ οἴκους προσκτήσασθαι, μεγέθει μὲν πόλεσιν ἑοικότας, πολυτελείᾳ δὲ βασιλείων, ἀπεικότας οὐδεν· τοῖς δὲ λοιποῖς τῶν εὖ γεγονότων οὐχ ὁμοίαν ἐνεδείκνυτο τὴν προαίρεσιν', Zonaras, pp. 259-260. Magdalino's translation of this same passage (*Speculum*, p. 330), while accurately conveying Zonaras's

John makes an explicit distinction between the desired characteristics of a private person as compared to those of an emperor. As a man, Alexius is likeable, moderate, in control of his passions, and generous. As an emperor, however, he has lost sight of his priorities and his duty to the state, instead giving away vast sums of money to those in his inner circle.

John's assessment of Alexius's character differs significantly from Anna's, not only in tone but in the way Alexius's character is linked to his ability to rule. In the *Alexiad*, the emperor's good qualities enable him to rule more effectively; in the *Epitome Historiarum*, his good character is irrelevant and insufficient to make him an effective ruler, and in some cases leads him to the extravagance John condemns him for. This is evident in his approach to money: John describes him as not yielding to money or loving it too much, in line with his other praiseworthy qualities, but his generosity turns into wastefulness and nepotism in his role as emperor.

This criticism of Alexius's extravagance is in line with a speech made to Alexius by John the Oxite in 1091 that carries a similar theme. John the Oxite was a senior cleric who was appointed Archbishop of Ohrid shortly after 1091.¹¹⁹ While he criticised Alexius's misappropriation of church funds,¹²⁰ his primary grievance was, like John Zonaras, concerned with the emperor's favouritism. Peter Frankopan asserts that John the Oxite's criticisms are used to frame the specific complaint that Alexius 'was treating his family and his retinue at the expense of all others'.¹²¹ Alexius had funded his military campaigns through excessive taxation and taking money from the Church, while those closest to him enjoyed excessive wealth with no sign of financial hardship.¹²² John the Oxite criticises the material comfort of Alexius's inner circle in relation to the exuberant costs of his military campaigns, while John Zonaras draws the comparison between Alexius's family and comparable 'well-born' members of the aristocracy, who enjoy no such benefits. John the Oxite's speech demonstrates that John Zonaras's criticisms were not made in isolation, and were being expressed early in Alexius's reign.

ideas, takes a less literal approach that deviates slightly from the original in both sentence structure and meaning, most notably by either shifting or dropping emphases and demonstrative pronouns.

¹¹⁹ P. Frankopan, 'Where Advice Meets Criticism: Theophylact of Ohrid, John the Oxite and Their (Re)Presentations to the Emperor', *Al-Masāq*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2008, p. 82

¹²⁰ Frankopan, *Al-Masāq*, p. 81

¹²¹ Frankopan, p. 83

¹²² Frankopan, pp. 81-83

In the *Alexiad*, Anna presents Alexius's extravagance quite differently. In contrast to criticism of Alexius as unfairly favouring those closest to him, Anna praises her father's generosity as a virtue and a valuable aspect of diplomacy:

His courage and intelligence surpassed other men, and made his sworn men devote themselves to Alexius. They were excessively fond of him, being most generous and with hands more liberal than others with regard to giving, though he was not excessively wealthy.¹²³

Throughout the *Alexiad*, Anna gives countless examples of Alexius giving generous gifts to aid diplomacy or placate those who plotted against him. She presents these incidents as evidence of both Alexius's virtue, particularly generosity and clemency, and his practical approach to political necessity. John Zonaras, however, is less concerned with the reasons behind Alexius's spending and more concerned with its effect on the state. The issue of spending highlights a key difference between Anna and John in their assessments of Alexius: Anna's personal connection to the emperor ensures she sees as praiseworthy and important any diplomatic gift-giving that would placate Alexius's enemies and keep him safely on the throne; John's concern lies not with the emperor himself but with the state, and Alexius's spending, regardless of purpose, sees the state suffering as a result. While Anna and John agree on certain aspects of Alexius's character, such as his generosity, his clemency, and his level temper, they are at odds regarding whether these traits were important in his capacity as emperor. Anna's concept of the ideal emperor is shaped according to Classical and Biblical models, while John's is firmly rooted in the practical consideration of what the state needs in a ruler.

While there is a clear contrast in tone between the *Epitome Historiarum* and the *Alexiad*, John has considerably more in common with the *Kaiserkritik* tradition of historiography that became common in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This was characterised by criticism of individual emperors.¹²⁴ Magdalino explicitly identifies John with twelfth-century *Kaiserkritik*, alongside the work of Nicetas Choniates,¹²⁵ and Michael Angold speaks of a 'civil service tradition of

¹²³ 'προσέκειντο δὲ καὶ τῷ Ἀλεξίῳ μᾶλλον οἱ εἰρημένοι ἄνδρες τὰ τε ἄλλα, καὶ διότι ἀνδρεία καὶ συνέσι τῶν ἄλλων διέφερε. φιλοδωρότατόν τε ὄντα καὶ τὴν χεῖρα, εἴπερ τις ἄλλος, περὶ τὰς δόσεις εὐκίνητον λίαν ὑπερηγάπων, καίτοι μὴ πάνυ τι πλούτῳ περιρρέομενον', Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, vol. 1. p. 74

¹²⁴ F. H. Tinnefeld, *Kategorien der Kaiserkritik in der byzantinischen Historiographie von Prokop bis Niketas Choniates*, Munich, Fink, 1971, pp. 161-162, , cited in P. Magdalino, 'Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine *Kaiserkritik*', *Speculum*, vol. 58, no. 2, 1983, p. 327

¹²⁵ Magdalino, *Speculum*, pp. 328-329

historiography' that could be critical of imperial rule.¹²⁶ Angold summarises Michael Psellus's account of the eleventh-century crisis as resulting from the 'mismanagement of the system of honours and the financial resources of the state' and a failure to respect constitutional rights.¹²⁷ While John's use of Psellus as a source has been noted,¹²⁸ the similarity between Psellus's assessment of the eleventh-century crisis and John's criticism of Alexius has not been explicitly recognised. This similarity in the nature of individual criticism further confirms John's engagement with the emerging trend of critical historiography. Magdalino states that as a historian, John had much in common with his precursors of the late eleventh century, Michael Psellus, Michael Attaleiates, and John Skylitzes.¹²⁹ He not only used their works as source material, but shared with them 'the interests and outlook of an increasingly self-confident professional bourgeoisie'.¹³⁰ Unlike Anna's classicised approach to history, John's work is very much a product of his time and is clearly influenced by contemporary trends in the historiographical tradition in Constantinople.

Historians such as James Howard-Johnston and Magdalino have highlighted the potential personal motivations behind John's condemnation of Alexius. Howard-Johnston refers to John's 'falling out of favour' with the Comneni and his 'hostile' account of Alexius's reign,¹³¹ and Magdalino suggests John 'may have had a personal grudge' against Alexius.¹³² Magdalino further explores John's motivations with regard to the new system of rewards and honours introduced under the Comneni, which saw the court aristocracy divided into a princely group and a senatorial or bureaucratic group.¹³³ The latter, seen as a 'second-class aristocracy', held predominantly judicial or administrative roles and were excluded from the honours and titles of the princely group.¹³⁴ Magdalino states that 'there can be no doubt' that John was a member of this second-class aristocracy,¹³⁵ a view backed by the fact that *droungarioi* were 'primarily members of the civil

¹²⁶ Angold, *The Byzantine Empire*, p. 2

¹²⁷ Angold, pp. 2-3

¹²⁸ Stavrakos, *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, p. 1544

¹²⁹ Magdalino, *Speculum*, p. 331

¹³⁰ Magdalino, p. 331

¹³¹ Howard-Johnston, *The Medieval Chronicle*, p. 9

¹³² Magdalino, *Speculum*, p. 330

¹³³ Magdalino, p. 336

¹³⁴ Magdalino, p. 336

¹³⁵ Magdalino, p. 337

nobility'.¹³⁶ John's social position, therefore, was directly affected by Comnenian reforms; the 'rest of the well-born' referenced in his criticism of Alexius's favouritism includes himself and others of his class.

Despite these potential personal motivations for his criticism of the Comneni, John's approach to other emperors in the *Epitome Historiarum* is also less than favourable. In his discussion of the *Kaiserkritik* aspects of the work, Magdalino points out John's 'explicit differentiation between the imperial and the common good' and highlights other points in the work where John criticises not only Alexius, but past emperors who were usually presented favourably.¹³⁷ These include Basil II (976-1025), presented as a tyrant; Romanus I (920-944), whose philanthropy could not be commended as he used public resources for it; and even Constantine I (306-337), whose magnificence John criticises as he would have imposed taxes to pay for it.¹³⁸ Magdalino contrasts John's concept of limited monarchy, which 'stressed the emperor's responsibility to earthly institutions',¹³⁹ and the perhaps more traditional view of his near contemporary Kekaumenos, who states that 'the emperor is not subject to the law, but is law'.¹⁴⁰ Magdalino aligns John more closely with a later twelfth-century writer, Nicetas Choniates, whom Franz Tinnefeld accredits with being 'the first and indeed the only Byzantine historian who applies such basic criticism to the idea of imperial power'.¹⁴¹ Magdalino challenges this assertion, suggesting that John also fits into this category of criticising imperial power as a whole.¹⁴² While John was certainly disillusioned with the state of the imperial office, there is little to suggest he was critical of the concept of imperial power itself. His statement on the qualities required for an emperor to carry out his office suggests he still believed in the system, provided there was a suitable ruler. His beliefs show a marked departure from the concept of an infallible, divinely appointed emperor, but do not go so far as to challenge emperorship entirely. His criticism of Alexius suggests that he, like many emperors before him, fell short of a standard that prioritises the state above the emperor's personal ambitions.

¹³⁶ A. Kazhdan, 'Droungarios tes Viglas', in A. Kazhdan (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 1, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 663

¹³⁷ Magdalino, p. 330

¹³⁸ Magdalino, p. 330

¹³⁹ Magdalino, p. 333

¹⁴⁰ Kekaumenos, *Nouthetikon eis Basilea*, ed. B. Wassiliewsky and V. Jernstedt, St Petersburg, 1896, p. 93, trans. P. Magdalino, cited in P. Magdalino, *Speculum*, p. 333

¹⁴¹ Tinnefeld, *Kategorien der Kaiserkritik*, cited in Magdalino, *Speculum* p. 327

¹⁴² Magdalino, p. 329

The *Epitome Historiarum* presents a critical view of Alexius's reign that offers a marked contrast to the idealised image of the emperor in the *Alexiad*. While acknowledging Alexius's good qualities, including his clemency, agreeable nature, and command of his passions, John concludes that these qualities alone are suitable for a private person, but are insufficient for a ruler. Alexius lacks the proper consideration for justice, his subjects, and the ancient customs of government, and his reign is therefore a failure. His extravagance in giving away public money to those in his inner circle earns him the greatest condemnation, and on this issue John differs clearly from Anna. John's criticism of Alexius is based on a set of standards informed by what the state requires from its emperor, as opposed to Anna's construction of an imperial ideal informed predominantly by ancient models. The 'ideal emperor' according to John is not a larger-than-life, heroic figure, but rather a ruler who shows due consideration and respect for the customs of the state and the needs of its subjects.

Conclusion

The character of Alexius I Comnenus and his suitability to occupy the imperial office are described in markedly different ways in the twelfth-century histories of Anna Comnena and John Zonaras. Depictions of imperial character in the twelfth century were influenced by the enduring model of Constantine I as the ideal emperor. Constantine's piety and orthodoxy in particular were held up as exemplary in later centuries, and the emperor's virtuous character was seen as contributing to his legitimacy and his ability to rule. The 'Macedonian Renaissance' sponsored by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus in the tenth century saw the imperial family link themselves anew to Constantine as the ideal emperor of antiquity. In the same century, the *History* of Leo the Deacon marked the beginning of a rise in historiography that criticised the characters and personal lives of emperors. The eleventh-century *Chronographia* of Michael Psellus exemplifies this new tradition, and was an influential source for both Anna Comnena and John Zonaras.

The *Alexiad* occupies a unique place in Byzantine historiography due to the position of its author as a *porphyrogetete*, the daughter of its subject, with an exceptionally high level of education. As a result, it constructs a unique ideal of imperial character that draws extensively from Classical and Biblical tradition. By modelling her *Alexiad* on the Homeric tradition, Anna places her father at the centre of an epic narrative and evokes an heroic ideal of rulership. Her use of Biblical references compares Alexius to Old Testament kings with regard to his piety and faith in God. For his role in fighting heresy, Anna compares him directly to Constantine. She further praises Alexius's cunning and trickery in outwitting his enemies, a point of view influenced by her closeness to the imperial court and her awareness of political intrigue. The *Alexiad* places Alexius into the wider context of rulership dating back to Classical and Biblical antiquity, in order to present him as a timeless model of the ideal imperial character.

The *Epitome Historiarum*, by contrast, takes a critical view of Alexius. While John praises aspects of Alexius's character, including his humility, compassion, and agreeable nature, these virtues are insufficient for an emperor. John outlines the qualities required for an ideal emperor, namely the care and consideration for justice, the empire's subjects, and upholding the ancient customs of state. By favouring his family for rewards, honours, and higher office, Alexius has failed in all these regards. This criticism highlights a key difference between the way Alexius is depicted in the *Alexiad* and the *Epitome Historiarum*. Anna presents Alexius's excessive spending as both a

sign of his generosity and as a tool for diplomacy; John condemns it as a violation of justice and the customs of the state. John's criticisms have clear parallels to the likes of Michael Psellus and to other Byzantine historians in the *Kaiserkritik* tradition. His social position as a member of the civil nobility disadvantaged by Alexius's nepotism further informs his assessment.

Both Anna and John are in agreement that as a man, Alexius is virtuous and praiseworthy. Their point of difference is on his suitability as an emperor. For Anna, every aspect of Alexius's character helps him to rule fairly and effectively, and aligns him with exemplary rulers from Biblical and Classical tradition. For John, Alexius's positive character traits are either insufficient for an emperor, or contribute directly to his failure to rule fairly and effectively. The different backgrounds and motivations of each writer are sufficient to explain these different assessments if they are reduced to a dichotomy of good or bad rulership. Anna likes Alexius, therefore she presents him in a positive light; John does not, and therefore presents him negatively. However, this dissertation has shown the marked differences in influences that informed each writer's ideal of imperial virtue. Steeped in Classical and Biblical learning, Anna draws her concepts of emperorship from antiquity. In addition, her place within the imperial family sees her prioritise the traits which Alexius uses to maintain his rule. John is much more contemporary in his outlook, drawing his concept of the ideal emperor from what he believes is needed by the state. He is part of a wider tradition of *Kaiserkritik* in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The differences between Anna and John's depictions of imperial character raise wider questions surrounding the perception of emperorship in Byzantine historical writing. Given the vastly different approaches taken by these two authors, as well as the difference in their assessment of Alexius, it is impossible to identify clear trends based on these sources alone. There is scope for further scholarship on this topic. In particular, further study of the depiction of imperial character in Byzantine historiography from the tenth through to the thirteenth century could offer valuable insight into the Macedonian Renaissance, the Eleventh Century Crisis, and the reign of the entire Comnenian dynasty. While the evaluations of Alexius's reign presented by Anna and John cannot and should not be seen as representative of twelfth-century thought as a whole, they nevertheless offer valuable insight into the importance of character to Byzantine emperorship.

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